



A sales representative from Shanxi province introduces herbal tea products to a visitor during the China International Fair for Trade in Services in Beijing. RUAN YANG / FOR CHINA DAILY

Trade show boasts the benefits of herbal tea



Officials aim to create stronger brand for products and increase awareness

By YUAN SHENGGAO

Customers can taste a variety of authentic herbal products in Shanxi at an ongoing trade show held from Thursday to Friday in Taiyuan, capital of the North China province.

More than 200 herbal tea products are on display across 12 exhibition areas covering 3,000 square meters at the Taiyuan Coal Transaction Center.

In addition to exhibitions, several forums and workshops are being held at this two-day event, with specialists and industry insiders sharing their insights into the emerging herbal tea industry. They're also informing visitors about the functions of various products and ways of steeping different herbal teas.

"Every city in Shanxi is displaying its local products, offering visitors an opportunity to taste as many teas as possible," said Feng Yaowu, head of the office of local produce in Shanxi.

Since the beginning of this year, authorities in Shanxi province have been working to develop herbal tea into a local pillar industry.

Their confidence is based on the rich local resources of medical herbs and a long provincial history in producing herbal teas and other herb-related products.

According to a recent national survey, Shanxi is home to nearly 1,800 varieties of medical herbs.

Herbs such as pilose asiabell, astragalus, forsythia, chrysanthemum and sea buckthorn are widely used in the production of herbal teas in Shanxi due to their ready availability and high quality.

Shanxi's herbal teas have been brewed and consumed for thousands of years.

The production of herbal teas in Shanxi shares some similarity with traditional teamaking in the rest of the country, which includes techniques such as drying, baking and fermenting.

However, unlike traditional teas that use tea leaves as their ingredients, many parts of herbs, including leaves, fruits and roots, can be used for making herbal teas in Shanxi. There are nearly 300 invention patents related to herbal tea production, according to local officials.

Some herbal teas can help control body temperature and flush out toxic substances, while others are good for immunity, sleep or digestion, experts said.

Prior to the ongoing event in Taiyuan, Shanxi's herbal tea products have been displayed at various trade shows in China.

During the 2020 China International Fair for Investment and Trade held in Xiamen, Fujian province, from Sept 8-11, herbal tea products from Shanxi attracted the attention of many visitors.

After drinking a cup of forsythia tea at one of the booths at the Shanxi pavilion, local visitor Zhao Ruixue said "this was the right taste," comparing it to her childhood experience.

A native of Pingding county of Shanxi province, Zhao has lived in Xiamen for decades.

"When I was a child, we used newly collected forsythia leaves to make tea by ourselves. Forsythia tea helps relieve inflammation and fevers," Zhao said. "Although many of the teas are ready-made products, they just taste the same as the old days," Zhao said.

On display at the Xiamen fair were more than 200 herbal tea varieties from 17 companies in Shanxi, including those made from mulberry leaves, astragalus roots, chrysanthemum flowers and wolfberry fruits.

Zhu Jie, a business visitor from Shanghai, said it was the first time that he drank the authentic Shanxi herbal teas.

"I am a lover of traditional teas. But I was pleasantly surprised with the herbal teas, considering their unique tastes and fragrances," Zhu said.

Before the Xiamen fair, Shanxi's herbal tea products were also exhibited at the China International Fair for Trade in Services, held in Beijing from Sept 4-9.

To help improve recognition of Shanxi's herbal tea, governments and businesses in Shanxi have launched a series of branding campaigns since the beginning of this year.

During a promotional fair for local herbal teas in Taiyuan on March 20, local businesses founded the Shanxi Herbal Tea Industrial Alliance, which is responsible for the promotion of herbal tea products, drafting industrial standards and helping members register their trademarks while designing corporate identities.

One of the alliance's earliest actions was launching the "Shanxi Herbal Tea", a collective brand for local products with a geographical indication, on the same day of its inauguration.

This brand is expected to make Shanxi Herbal Tea a recognized name like Longjing Tea in Zhejiang province, Pu'erh Tea in Yunnan and Wuyi Rock Tea in Fujian, according to Ju Zhen, chief of the Shanxi Department of Agriculture and Rural Affairs.

He said the herbal tea sector will become a new growth area in the province's rural development, alongside agricultural products with local geographical indications such as millet, matured vinegar, fragrant pear, walnut, sorghum, buckwheat and potato.

Guo Yanjie contributed to this story.

Emerging industry boosts rural growth

By YUAN SHENGGAO

Shanxi province is putting its hopes on the emerging herbal tea industry to revive its rural economy and help to reduce poverty in the countryside.

Tea made from Shanxi's medical herbs such as astragalus, forsythia, chrysanthemum, wolfberry and sea buckthorn are increasingly recognized by consumers throughout the country.

As the market size of the industry grows, more farmers in Shanxi are engaged in planting medical herbs and producing and selling herbal tea products. They see the industry an important means to increase income and relieve poverty.

When early autumn came in the middle of September in the high-altitude, mountainous village of Daqiao in Hunyuan county, local farmer Zhang Ji was busy harvesting astragalus roots on his farm.

"I estimated my family's total income from selling the herb this year should be more than 20,000 yuan (\$2,930), given the total output of 650 kilograms and the price of over 32 yuan a kilo," Zhang said.

Zhang began to see substantial growth in profit from growing astragalus in 2016.

"I discovered the price of astragalus roots grew steadily since the early 2010s. However, sales were not good because of poor road connectivity," Zhang said.

Zhang and his fellow villagers built a road to link the village and the rest of the county in 2016. As a result, the villager welcomed more dealers to buy the herb.

"We earned 16,000 yuan that year, which immediately lift my family from poverty," Zhang said, adding that his astragalus farm now grows to more than 5 hectares.

Zhang said the astragalus roots collected from his village are especially popular among medical herb purchasers.

"It takes six years for the astragalus to mature, so the quality of the product is ensured," Zhang explained.

According to Zhang, the total growing area of astragalus is more than 1,300 hectares in Daqiao village, with per capita growing area of 1.3 hectares.

Hunyuan county in northern Shanxi is renowned for its astragalus industry. Locally produced astragalus has been used for medicine production for more than 1,500 years, according to Zhang Jiuying, head of the county's herbal medication development center.

"Astragalus can be found in many parts of China, including Gansu, Shandong, Hebei and Sichuan provinces. However, astragalus in Hunyuan is especially famous for its quality," Zhang Jiuying said.

The average content of saponin — the effective ingredient for medicinal purposes — in astragalus from Hunyuan is 0.04 percent in China. But the content in Hunyuan's products is more than 0.16 percent on average, Zhang explained.

For this reason, Hunyuan astragalus became a geographical indication-protected product in 2014.

To increase added value for the product, Hunyuan's astragalus is currently widely used in making herbal teas, in addition to producing medicines.

The county recently established an astragalus tea industrial park to engage more individuals and businesses in the production, research and development and sales of the herbal tea products.

Hengshan Typical Herbal Tea Industry founded by local entrepreneur Zhao Fugui was the first company settled in the industrial park.

With a total investment of 170 million yuan, the enterprise's herbal tea production facility is scheduled to be operational in two years.

"Upon completion, our company will be capable of producing 160-million-yuan worth of astragalus tea a year," Zhao said.

Hengshan Tea Industry, founded by the Ciyao township government in Hunyuan, is another major astragalus tea producer in the park.

According to Wang Zhuoxiang, head of the Ciyao township government, the company can produce 15 metric tons of herbal tea products a year.

"This is a major poverty-relieving project founded by the township government," Wang said, adding it mainly purchases ingredients from impoverished families. "Last year, we bought more than 15 tons of ingredients from 86 poor families in Ciyao."

Guo Yanjie contributed to this story.



Workers sort astragalus roots before they are delivered to herbal tea producers. HUO FEIFEI / FOR CHINA DAILY

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Forsythia becomes boon for business

By YUAN SHENGGAO

In Yicheng county in the south of Shanxi province, local businesspeople and officials are happy to see a centuries-old industry relating to the medical herb of forsythia develop into an extended value chain covering traditional Chinese medicines, tea beverage and tourism.

Forsythia is a medical herb commonly seen in the north of China. It has been used for making medicines for thousands of years.

According to TCM experts, medicines using forsythia as ingredient can help people control their body temperature, clear away phlegm and improve their immunity.

Yicheng is one of the counties in Shanxi with a reputation for quality forsythia. People in the county have recently found that the value of forsythia is not limited to making medicines.

Yicheng Investment Group, a local company, recently launched a dozen forsythia tea products to meet market demand for health food.

"During a trade show held in Taiyuan on Aug 22, we debuted more than 10 varieties of forsythia tea into the market," said Wang Hongxing, executive director of the company. "We received a good number of orders for the products for the expected sales surge during the National Day and Middle Autumn Festival holidays in October."

According to county officials, the local businesses' move to diversify the forsythia industry is also a response to the provincial authorities' plan to boost the development of the herbal tea industry, which includes the production of forsythia tea products.

"As Shanxi plans to develop the herbal tea sector into an economic pillar, I believe there is more growth potential for the industry in our county," said Wang Yuan, Party secretary of the county.

In past years, according to Wang, the county's farmers mostly collected forsythia from the wild and the growing area of forsythia was about 3,000 hectares.

"As demand from local herbal tea producers rises substantially, we plan to develop more than 1,400 hectares of artificial plantations for forsythia," Wang said.

The locals also view the forsythia plantations as a major attraction for tourists, when the beautiful flowers bloom between March and April.

Nanliang, the earliest township in Yicheng to develop artificial plantations for forsythia, is also a pioneer in developing herb-based sightseeing tours, Wang said.

Since 2017, the township has held forsythia-themed tourism events every year, attracting tens of thousands of visitors.

"We are planning to develop a theme park on forsythia in the county, highlighting activities including sightseeing, tea tasting and recreation," Wang said.

Guo Yanjie contributed to this story.



A worker takes forsythia leaves to baking machines at the herbal tea factory in Shanxi. ZHANG DAN / FOR CHINA DAILY

Fruits help to preserve local ecology, bring revenue to farmers

By YUAN SHENGGAO

Late September is harvest season for sea buckthorn fruit in Fangshan county in the west of Shanxi.

Zhao Gaiping, a resident in Huiyun village, was busy collecting the yellow or orange-colored fruit that scattered on the slopes of Lyuliang Mountains.

"Selling the fruit to local wine or herbal tea producers is an important source of my family income," Zhao said.

With rich content of various vitamins and amino acids, sea buckthorn is a favorite ingredient for producers. Herbal tea made from the leaves help with digestion, lowering blood fat and blood pressure.

However, in the eyes of local officials, the sea buckthorn goes beyond healthy food. It's also used for the protection of the environment.



Aboriginal plants such as forsythia are used to preserve ecology in Shanxi, as they can protect soil from being washed away by rains. HU BO / FOR CHINA DAILY

Due to a reduction in vegetation coverage over the past few decades, Fangshan is among the regions of weakest ecology in Shanxi. Water erosion has presented severe challenges that have required generations of

locals to tackle, said Wang Jinfeng, Party secretary of the county.

"In our decades' practice in improving the environment, we found that aboriginal plants like wild sea buckthorn can play a crucial role in protecting soil from being washed away by rains," Wang said.

The county began to plant sea buckthorn at the beginning of this century, and more than 13,000 hectares of the wild herb has been added to the mountains and hills in Fangshan, Wang said.

The ecological environment has steadily improved during the past two decades, evidenced by growing vegetation coverage, clearer water and the increase of wild animals.

"In the Hengquan Reservoir area, birds like egrets and storks can be spotted all year round," said Liu Quanzhang, a local farmer.

In Huozhou city in the southwest of Shanxi, officials and residents are hoping the plant *wenguanguo*, or shiny-leaf yellowhorn, will improve ecology and increase income.

Huozhou used to be one of the top coal-producing regions in Shanxi. During the province's shift from a coal-reliant to a diversified economy, the city is using *wenguanguo* to repair the ecology at its mining sites.

Due to its ability to resist coldness, drought and alkaline, *wenguanguo* has been used in many regions in China to prevent desertification.

Medicines and teas made from *wenguanguo* are good for reducing blood pressure, blood fat and blood sugar.

Zhang Hua, a local businessman in Huozhou, was the first person in the country to found a company engaged in the planting of *wenguanguo* to make herbal tea.

His company, Wenguanguo Technology, includes a *wenguanguo* farm of 40 hectares and a factory with an annual capacity of 10 metric tons of herbal tea.

The company currently employs dozens of people from local households.

"We are planning to enlarge the scale of the company with hopes of greening more barren hills and helping more farmers get rich," Zhang said.

Guo Yanjie contributed to this story.